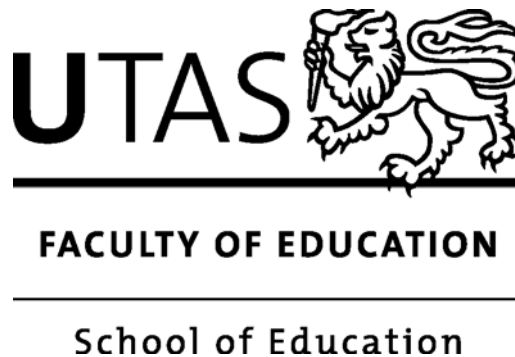


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**Constructing researcher identity:  
An “impostor’s” stories of becoming**

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# Constructing researcher identity: An “impostor’s” stories of becoming

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## Abstract

*This autobiographical and iterative narrative relates the ongoing process of my “becoming” a researcher. Framed within the context of my life and the dailiness of full-time scholarship study, and set during a period when existing understandings of what it is to be (considered) a researcher are being challenged, my narrative introduces the influential characters, human relationships, critical incidents and events essential to my becoming. Stories of my serendipitous mid-life entry into the world of school education as an aide to a child with special needs, my subsequent urge to qualify as a teacher, and my decisions to undertake honours study and commit to a doctorate in an emotionally demanding area of study provide fertile ground for my contemplations of and reflections on educational research; process and product. In this paper, I out myself as an academic impostor (Brookfield, 1995) by exposing my feelings of uncertainty and doubt. I describe those times when I feel most creative, most rewarded and happiest as a researcher; flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; 1997). I use the notion of generativity scripts (McAdams, 1988) to position myself within the process of research mentoring and induction currently shaping and influencing my realisation as a researcher.*



... from the narrative point of view, identities have histories. They are narrative constructions that take shape as life unfolds... (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 95)

## The first first step

“Congratulations! Today, you have taken the first step in your research career!”

I am shocked! I want to object, to call out: “But I don’t want a research career! *All* I want is to be the best teacher that I can be!” I stifle an almost overwhelming desire to verbalise the resistance I feel. I purse my lips and my cry stays locked within; silent to the Honours Co-ordinator and to my peers.

This is not what I expected. I am disappointed; let down. I had requested this information session so that, along with other interested third-year students, I could find out more about this unknown, only-hinted-at thing called “Honours”. This was something that I had been convinced was “the next logical step” in the life journey of an academically-successful undergraduate student teacher. I wonder to myself why I have even considered applying to undertake Honours if this is what it means. I tell myself that this is not something I *need* to do to be a good teacher.

And still I cannot quite extinguish the spark of desire. Why *is* this? Because I am considered capable? Because my results qualify me? Because I’ll be disappointed with

myself if I don't take this "opportunity" while I can? Because it *is* the next logical step? Is that a reason? Is it reason *enough*? I "hedge my bets" and enrol in Research Methods.



## The urge to become

It's funny how things start. I remember how, while working in my pre-uni life as a teacher's aide to a child with special needs, I began to feel such a deep desire – somewhat akin to a primal urge, in that I could not deny its hold on me – to become a teacher. So strong was my desire, that at 39 years of age, and after three years of life in early childhood classes, I left the school and Stuart, my little shadow, and enrolled in a Bachelor of Education degree. And I did this *despite* the well-meaning advice of Alice, my classroom teacher, that I was too old, *despite* the fact that I was also working part-time in our family business, and *despite* being the primary care-giver to our three children.

Enrolling at university was a bold and scary move for me. A school hater when I left school having just turned 15, 25 years before, I had wanted to be 'out' of school and into the world of work (and income-earning) at the earliest possible opportunity. I'd chosen *sensible* subjects – shorthand and typing. Sensible in that they would get me a job. Sensible, as opposed to *preferred* subjects – art and sewing; subjects I really enjoyed. And not only enjoyed, but would have chosen if I'd felt I was free to choose. Free to choose? I may have been a school hater, but I wasn't stupid. The only thing I'd ever dreamt of being was a vet, and that would have meant many years of study and living away from all that I knew; possibilities I couldn't even contemplate at 15.<sup>1</sup> So, I viewed work as a way out of school, or more specifically, as a way out of my Catholic girl's-only school. Work was a first step towards independence from school and from my middle-class working (non-professional) parents who were strict and protective of me, the eldest of their three daughters. Feeling indefinable barriers closing in on me, I made what seemed to be the only sensible choice to me at that time. Upon completion of grade 10, I left high school.

Without a great deal of rumination, I followed a couple of friends and enrolled in secretarial college. I did reasonably well, and improved on my shorthand and typing speeds. I was introduced to manual double-entry book-keeping. As Mary Poppins (Stevenson, 1964) (sarcastically?) suggests of account-keeping, I learned "to feel the thrill of totting up a balanced book," enjoying the precision that this task demanded of me. Towards the end of that year, I declined the college principal's invitation to complete a second year of study, and was awarded a secretarial certificate. Work held more attraction for me than did further study.

And I was successful; that's if success is measured by having always been in work. Upon leaving the college, I gained employment as a legal secretary in a local law firm and worked there in both land conveyancing and litigation departments. After three years with the law firm, and just having turned 19, I married David and we moved to New Zealand. After two months of freedom and directional spontaneity hitch-hiking down The Land of the Long White Cloud, I spent two years working as a secretary-receptionist in the tourism industry in Queenstown. Then, early in 1981, distraught and home-sick

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<sup>1</sup> It would have meant two more years of school (grades 11 and 12), and then five years of university study. The University of Tasmania did/does not offer a Bachelor of Veterinary Science (B.V.Sc.) degree.

after the mid-term miscarriage of an unplanned but celebrated pregnancy, we moved back home to Tasmania.

For three years, while David struggled to start his own mechanical business, I worked as a secretary to the partners in a land surveying firm, supporting us both financially. One of the long-term benefits of my position there was getting an early introduction to computers. When the first computer was installed, all staff were new to computing and had to gain the necessary skills. I've always eagerly accepted opportunities to up-skill. I knew that computer-use was the way of the future in business, and I believed myself lucky to be catching a ride on the crest of the incoming technology wave. It also helped realise a childhood ambition to work with computers – an ambition born at a time when I'd only seen pictures in an encyclopaedia, when computers were room-sized!

However, following a second, and this time successful, pregnancy and parenthood, I settled, somewhat reluctantly,<sup>2</sup> straight into the family mechanical engineering partnership where my secretarial, book-keeping, and computing skills were viewed as much needed assets. And there I might have stayed. Languished, perhaps?

It seemed serendipitous,<sup>3</sup> really, that a conversation with one of my daughters' teachers had resulted, some years later, in me being offered a teacher's aide position at their school. Over the course of the three years spent in kindergarten and prep classrooms, I had found joy in the small but significant steps made by my little student, Stuart, and other students I worked with on an individual and small-group basis. These small successes, together with the relationships I had developed with the students, their parents and the teaching and ancillary staff at the school, steadily built my confidence in my self and in my abilities. I came to believe that I could be the teacher instead of the aide; be the bride instead of the bridesmaid.



## Success breeds...?

It was a damning thing getting an HD<sup>4</sup> on my first assignment at university. I was thrilled at the time, of course. Daunted by the prospect of having my writing compared to that of my recently TE-ranked<sup>5</sup> college-leaving year cohort, and haunted by my high school history teacher's report of me as "a poor student," I'd put an extravagant number of hours into trying to perfect my essay; my first in over 25 years. I was *terrified* that I'd fail. And that in failing I would *be* a failure. *Terrified* that I'd run into a teacher or parent from the school and have to *admit* my failure. Would have to *admit* that I didn't belong at uni. *Admit* that I should have known my place; should have stayed an aide.

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<sup>2</sup> I say reluctantly for a number of reasons, and because I felt at the time that I had little choice. Our business needed my skills, and, as we made very little profit (well below the poverty line at that time), we couldn't afford to pay someone for work that I could do at no outgoing cost. I also didn't want to put my children into full-time day care by returning to paid work. Additionally, I'd seen the impact of working together over a number of years on my parents' relationship, and I was very reluctant to become similarly disenchanted.

<sup>3</sup> Plunkett (2001, p. 156) suggests that "serendipity is used to describe a subjective, conscious, and affectively varied characterization of one's experience as being driven by chance or incident, with goal and means not fully, consciously articulated or owned by the individual."

<sup>4</sup> High Distinction – a grade assessment of between eighty and one hundred percent.

<sup>5</sup> Tertiary Entrance Score – a score derived from the combined results over four or five college-level subjects which is used to determine entry to university courses.

And so I was damned from the beginning. Damned forever to try to keep up this level of (over-)achievement. Damned because to get less than an HD was to let my standard slip; to fail. It was silly really; such an unhealthy thought process, but that's what it felt like at the time. I hope that I've grown from there. I hope.



## Writing my way into the process

"Are you doing Honours?" my language education lecturer asks as we sit on the bus heading to the north west coast for one of the committee meetings I attend as a student rep.<sup>6</sup> "I'm 99.5% positive that I'm not," I reply. Later, during the meeting, he tries unsuccessfully to hide a gleeful grin as, just like a kid in school, he passes me a note: "I'm a very good supervisor," it reads. Later, we talk some more. My interest is piqued when I find out that Robin, too, attended uni as a mature-age student; that in a previous and seemingly remote life – a pre-uni life – he had been a horse-breaker! This for me was a real-world connection to one of my longstanding, out-of-uni interests – a connection that brings him instant respect and credibility in my eyes.

Further discussion follows. He makes explicit for me the relationship between the research process and teaching practice. How one can inform the other. How it doesn't need to be research *or* teaching, but that it can be *both*; that my teaching can benefit from my *doing* research; that I can be a *better* teacher if I do research. He wants to know what I am interested in finding out about, wants to know what intrigues me, and doesn't push his own interests.

After much reading and discussion, my interests in upper primary school students, reading and affect come together into a coherent research proposal which is accepted. A hellishly busy year follows: ethical approvals, participant recruitment, interviews with teachers, questionnaires with students, and the necessary interruption of seven weeks out of uni on the practicum internship. Then, six weeks before the date on which I'm supposed to submit my thesis, I am hit by the realisation that I am in data overload; that I can never complete the study as planned because I have tried to do too much, and too much still remains undone. That night I cry myself to sleep, exhausted, wondering if it's too late to withdraw. Wondering what withdrawal might mean to my expectation of a graduation shared with friends. Wondering if I can bear to live through failure.

I decide that I cannot.

And so, I begin to think my way out of the situation in which I find myself. I decide to rework my questions, to shelve most of my data, to write up what data remains as narratives and to write myself into the process – writing my way into the process of *becoming* a researcher.

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<sup>6</sup> During the four years I studied as an undergraduate, I represented both my year group and all Bachelor of Education students on a number of committees – the Student Representative Committee, the Bachelor of Education Course Advisory Committee, the Education Faculty Forum, and the Bachelor of Education External Review Panel.

Over those six weeks my bottom numbs, and the muscles in my neck, shoulders and arms seize up as I sit at my computer during every available moment and type-write. I put myself to bed early each morning as my head begins to wilt in the direction of the keyboard. On the due date, and cursing that I allowed myself three hours sleep, I am still writing to finish off the later chapters as I print out the earlier ones. No time for much-needed editorial pruning or tightening of argument. But it is done – well, except for one unfinished sentence, lost and neglected in the final rush to have it gone. I collapse into Robin's office armchair and the tears roll down my face. That night, as I sleep the sleep of the truly exhausted, my body, no longer sustained by the frantic need to go on, and depleted of all strength to fight, is attacked and invaded by cold germs. I succumb and take to my bed for three days, without protest.



## A reality check

In feedback from Robin on this paper thus far, member-checking if you like on the preceding section, he expressed his surprise and pleasure at having been acknowledged and portrayed by me in this narrative as a catalyst in my decision-making process. However, he believed that I should allow myself a moment of congratulation at this point, commenting: “I don't really get much of a sense of that kind of exhilaration that comes from a remarkable accomplishment – yet. I'm hoping that will be in the next exciting instalment” (R. C. Wills, personal communication, April 5, 2006).

So, yes, I did do well. The (too) many, long hours I had put into my studies by attending lectures and tutorials, staying up late and working weekends slogging over books and preparing assignments eventually paid off. With the support and endurance of my family despite, at times, my neglect of them, and Robin's guidance and diligence as my supervisor over my Honours year I made it to graduation. And graduation day was a high point for me, a day I had never felt confident would arrive. Following a gowned procession through Launceston's main streets under the heat of a mid-summer sun, my family bore witness to my graduation amidst friends. I achieved First Class Honours and a University Medal.<sup>7</sup> As I strode across the stage to accept the university's official validation of those achievements, I was treading in the very large (and, still to me, seemingly steadier) footsteps made three years earlier by my respected colleague, Dr Tim Moss, another presenter at this symposium.

Graduation changed me; I felt like a different person. In acknowledgement, I changed my signature – one I'd had for over twenty years.



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<sup>7</sup> In 2002, the year in which I graduated, there were nine University Medals awarded at the University of Tasmania. “University Medals [are] awarded to candidates who have qualified for a bachelor degree with first class honours and normally shall have attained a Grade Point Average of no less than 4.5 in all but their first year of study” (University of Tasmania, n.d.). “The number of University medals awarded annually shall be twelve normally, but the number awarded in any one year shall take into account the number and quality of the Bachelor degrees with First Class Honours awarded by the University in that year” (University of Tasmania, n.d.).

## The evolving researcher

Here I would like to take a scenic detour, because Robin's comment about my lack of exuberance has caused me to reflect on my uni experience, and where this experience 'fits' with my 'becoming' a researcher.

When I enrolled at uni, I found that, as well as studying the expected courses aimed directly at preparing me for teaching within a school context, I was expected to enrol in something called "liberal studies." I think back now on the amount of time I spent flicking back and forth through the UTAS Handbook and website trying to find out what a "liberal study" was. While this term was used within my course outline, nowhere could I find a definition. This caused me great concern at the time: I felt that the meaning must clearly be obvious to everyone else as otherwise it would have been defined.

I eventually discovered the meaning of, and even purpose for, compulsory liberal studies. And, to my joy, I found that this university impost was a real bonus; something I hadn't expected. Recalling the regret of not choosing to follow my heart in subject choice at high school, this time around I decided to steer away from sensible or expected subjects. So, I chose subjects in which I was interested.<sup>8</sup> I enrolled in Fauna of Tasmania, Genetics, Computer Applications (my "easy" option), and Physical Environment in my first year, and in second year took up Introduction to Drawing, Design and Technology (cardboard engineering and woodwork) and Professional Presentation Skills. My choices, I have been told, were atypical for education students.

I found it easy to love Fauna of Tasmania taught by Professor Andrew Osborn, a passionate scientist and wonderful teacher. In this largely laboratory-based biology course we studied animals from the single-cell varieties up to the macropods<sup>9</sup> and monotremes<sup>10</sup> endemic to our state. The taxonomy keys used to classify organisms reminded me of the family tree I'd begun researching as a grade seven project – a project still growing today. Using dissection microscopes, I was able to witness and then draw nature's tiny wonders up close – the beautiful pink-stained crystal-like hooks and suckers, works of art really, by which tapeworms attach themselves, and the fantastical legs of insects and the "hairy" spider varieties. This course allowed me to combine my love of animals with my drawing skills, a little rusty from their neglect since high school.

The second course I studied with Andrew was Genetics. This for me fulfilled another dream, one I thought I'd never realise. As a twelve-year old breeder of budgies, I'd saved for and bought a book on colour breeding and from its intense study I gained a good understanding of Mendelian genetics, particularly colour trait inheritance. I would calculate the percentage rates of expected outcomes of certain crosses, type these up on 5" by 8" filing cards, and then breed my birds to achieve the results I wanted. Then, I'd record my successes as I went, noting any recessive trait inheritances revealed in the process. The wheat growing and vinegar fly breeding experiments in the classroom failed to provide me with *quite* the level of expectation and excitement I felt during my own early bird breeding experiments; however I did learn more about 'scientific' research, and my scientific report writing skills developed and improved under Andrew's tutelage.

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<sup>8</sup> Mind you, some of these I felt would be useful to me as a future teacher of primary or middle school students as well.

<sup>9</sup> Macropods are marsupials belonging to the family Macropodidae, which includes kangaroos, wallabies, tree kangaroos, pademelons, and several others.

<sup>10</sup> Any of an order (Monotremata) of egg-laying mammals comprising the platypuses and echidnas.



Resuscitated by my biology-based courses and now wanting a life of their own, my drawing skills found an outlet in life drawing classes. And, in the Physical Environment classes, my already well-established love of nature grew with a more substantial, theoretical underpinning of the processes continually at work in shaping our planet. At uni I was able to study these interests about which I'd been passionate for a long time. I had never believed that I'd be able to study them formally. It may seem odd, but I'd never thought *of* studying them formally. It had just never occurred to me that uni was an option for me.

Upon reflection, though, perhaps the most important, and somewhat startling, realisation that has occurred to me since enrolling at uni is that I am now consciously aware that I love to learn. I can see, too, that university study opened the door to a whole new world of possibilities in research, as in life; possibilities I had never before thought to consider.

As well as this, while I acknowledge the importance of my other roles, I feel that my university experience freed me from an identity *by association*: being “just” my husband's wife, my children's mother, the wife in the husband and wife partnership business, and the teachers' aide in the early childhood classes. I welcomed my independent identity.



## Self reflection and discovery

Shortly after finishing my honours year, I enrolled in a three-day professional development workshop<sup>11</sup> I'd seen advertised at uni. This event, like others related in this story, has changed the course of my life,<sup>12</sup> and has also been responsible for influencing my thinking on my life.

Like most attendees (predominantly teachers, social workers and members of other 'caring' professions), I enrolled in the workshop in order to develop my understanding of, and skills in assisting students and others dealing with life stressors – the breakdown of the family unit, drug and other lifestyle choices and addictions, suicide, anxiety and depression, loss and grief.

The three long days were jam-packed full of professional learning, and yet they were very personally developing as well.<sup>13</sup> Because, while I learnt how to facilitate student, staff or community support groups, due to my experiential participation within the group process<sup>14</sup> I also developed certain understandings about myself. I could see clearly the indelible stamp of my biography on my self. I learned about my fears and defences, my ways of coping, and how my feelings of (Catholic?) guilt come from the (number of)

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<sup>11</sup> MESH Support Group Facilitator Training, run by Nairn Walker Social Solutions Pty Ltd in Tasmania.

<sup>12</sup> Following the course, I chose to begin a PhD investigating the impact and enduring outcomes of this program on the personal and professional lives of teachers working within Tasmanian schools.

<sup>13</sup> This view is supported by data derived from questionnaires (Jones, in progress), with 89.4% of all respondents ( $n = 47$ ) considering the workshop to be both professional and personal development.

<sup>14</sup> Participation does not involve role-play, but being a group participant in eight group sessions over 3 days.

rules by which I try to live my life.<sup>15</sup> Through listening to other group members' life experiences, I also learnt a great deal about the human condition.<sup>16</sup>

I began to understand that my perfectionism and my drive to achieve are defences I have developed in order to protect myself from feelings of inadequacy, lack of self-esteem, and shame. They can, in fact, be viewed as addictive behaviours, notwithstanding that the outcomes of these particular types of addictions are generally seen as positive and rewarded in our achievement-oriented society.<sup>17</sup> I wonder whether, given a different set of circumstances, I could just as easily have become alcohol- or other drug-dependent and, therefore, been less rewarded. Unconsciously, personal (not necessarily public) achievement was my "drug of choice." Maybe it still is, but I'm currently working on that issue.



## Lived experience meets formal theory

I've lived with the uncertainty and fear that I'm out of my depth at uni for some time now. I have often felt that I'm really not intellectually bright enough to be (t)here. Despite the logical assumption that earning good grades, gaining First Class Honours and then being awarded a University Medal would be enough to dissuade me from feeling inadequate, these tributes only serve to reinforce my feelings of doubt. What I do know is that there is so much more to learn and know. And so I feel that I am a fraud; that somehow I am here under false pretenses, and that, one day, *surely*, I will be discovered for the fake that I must be/am. And then?

In his early reading of my draft paper, Robin recognised the fears I had expressed, and probably the patterns of behaviour that I exhibit, as having a name – the impostor phenomenon (IP) or syndrome. And with the knowledge that such a condition exists, I reacted like a true researcher. A quick internet search for sources led me to take Brookfield's (1995) Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher down from my bookshelf, and some reading confirmed that what was described in the literature was, indeed, what I was feeling. Somewhat surprised, I found that, according to Brookfield, "teachers often feel like impostors" (p. 227). He quotes deVries' (1993, p. 129) summary:

These people have an abiding feeling that they have fooled everyone and are not as competent and intelligent as others think they are. They attribute their success to good luck, compensatory hard work, or superficial factors .... Some are incredibly hardworking, always overprepared. However, they are unable to accept that they have intellectual gifts and ability. They live in constant fear that their imposturous existence will be exposed – that they will not be able to measure up to others' expectations and that catastrophe will follow.

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<sup>15</sup> By this I mean that I develop guilty feelings when I either fail to do things that I believe are expected of me (by myself or others), or I do things that I believe I shouldn't (because of my own or others' values).

<sup>16</sup> To date, since November 2002, as part of my doctoral research I have attended 14 different 3-day workshops, sharing the group experience with 136 fellow group members. I facilitated 4 of these groups.

<sup>17</sup> Where a work addiction may be valued by employers, and yet be detrimental to an individual or their family. Work addicts are rewarded with Employee of the Month, Teacher of the Year, or University Medallist awards, for example.

It wasn't very hard to recognise elements of myself within Brookfield's pages.<sup>18</sup> And, whilst psychological labelling is not universally found to be useful or helpful, sometimes finding a diagnosis (a label) for worrisome medical or mental symptoms eases anxiety and fear amongst sufferers. And, for me, I think this has indeed been the case; that a theoretical (psychology-based) understanding of what I am feeling has helped me to put my fears into perspective.

And I am finding that a new perspective is valuable, for at times in the past my feelings of impostorship have inhibited my research study, disabling me from being able to "function at [my] highest level" (Oriel et al., 2004, p. 248). I have worried, for example, that I haven't known enough about any one thing to have an informed (enough) opinion, so I have felt the need to read more and more on subjects ever-expanding. And academic 'skimming' and 'quote snatching' has never been enough, because I have needed to read and to understand. Like other 'failure fearers,' if I lack understanding then I think that I've failed,<sup>19</sup> and as a consequence my fears have resulted in me teetering uncomfortably on a knife-edge between over-preparation and procrastination (Thompson, Foreman, & Martin, 2000, p. 630). And with an expected completion date looming just over the horizon, I am aware that I need to concentrate my energies on writing, not on (probably unfounded) fears.



## Reflecting at the crossroads

Background reading on the construction of identity, together with the development of reflective and reflexive thought processes, has led me to draw some conclusions that eluded me in the turmoil of the post-graduation period. At that time, I felt there was a gnawing mismatch – a yawning, gaping chasm – between how I wanted to *be* as a teacher and how I *felt* as a teacher. This mismatch jarred with my growing sense of self. I think I'd reached a stage in my life when I wanted to be whole. I didn't want to live a life as a split personality. This internal conflict which resulted in my conscious decision not to enter a teaching career would appear to have been caused, at least in part, by my inability to successfully begin, or want to begin, to integrate a teacher professional identity with my existing and preferred personal identity; I experienced what Warin terms "identity dissonance" (Warin, 2003, as cited in Warin, Maddock, Pell, & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 237). In becoming a teacher, I felt I would be living a lie.

And yet, in comparison, I felt considerably less psychological discomfort over the possibility of being able to pursue further research opportunities and qualifications. Of course, I was aware that further study would be challenging, particularly as I was choosing to enter a new field of study, and I had anticipated my studies would (again) cause me to be stressed. But whereas I would have had to work hard to 'accommodate' a teacher identity by making changes in my self identity, I felt more easily able, or prepared

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<sup>18</sup> For those with a more clinical approach to understanding, I scored 89 on the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS), meaning that I have intense impostor phenomenon (IP) experiences. The CIPS is the measure used within psychology to determine whether individuals have IP characteristics, and is considered to be both valid and internally reliable (Oriel, Plane, & Mundt, 2004). The CIPS is composed of 20 items, each valued on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 equating to 'not at all' and 5 to 'very true.' A score of 62 has been established as a clinical cut-off.

<sup>19</sup> IP overlaps with another psychological construct, Fear of Failure (FOF), with both generally being indicative of a lack of self-confidence (Fried-Buchalter, 1992, p. 377).

perhaps, to ‘assimilate’ a researcher identity and maintain self-consistency with my perceptions of self (Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development, see for example McInerney & McInerney, 1998). Absorbing new researcher identity elements into previously existing schemes was seemingly easier. Perhaps I had begun the construction during my pre-teen experiences of research. For whatever reason, it was in research that I felt a better ‘fit.’

However, at the time and without the aid of hindsight, I needed to make a decision; the ‘what next’ decision. And decision-making has never been my forte.



## Seeds that fell on fertile ground

In our busy yet frequently isolating society, I believe that giving feedback is a neglected art form. We are not properly taught to accept compliments or to take on board criticisms that come our way, often preferring to deflect or defend. I’ve always given positive feedback where I believe it’s warranted, and I know the value of receiving it. I recall the words of encouragement that influenced my decision-making and ultimately my ‘becoming’ a researcher.

At my graduation dinner, I was approached by one of the ‘anonymous’ assessors of my Honours thesis. She told me that she felt I had a gift for research and writing, and she urged me to consider a future in research. I was stunned and remain grateful. Another former lecturer borrowed my thesis to read, and returned it with a note in which she described my work as ‘beautiful.’ I was deeply touched by her comment, and I use her descriptor as a criterion for my next opus; my doctoral thesis.

And then there was my husband. Right from the outset, I felt that David had failed to understand my need to be away from the business, “wasting so much time mucking around at the school.” If I was to go to uni at all, he’d suggested that I “should study economics or accounting – something that would be useful to the business.” And, then there was his query, “Don’t you know how many marriages fail when women go off to uni?” He made sure I knew. But I also knew that I had come to the understanding that our marriage was doomed if I *didn’t* go to uni. In the end, he chose to accept my decision, supporting me financially through my undergraduate years.

David had to leave on a plane for Canberra immediately after my Honours presentation. I was disappointed because I had wanted the chance to discover what he had thought of my work; work he’d never read. I hadn’t been expecting him to call, and so I was surprised when he rang me from the airport shortly after arrival. And, with his words, “You should go on,” the tensions I had felt in trying to achieve an *independent* identity while maintaining a workable and satisfying marital relationship eased. Tears welled in my eyes. I had found the niche I had sought between belonging and independence (Richardson, 1997, pp. 19-20).



## Yet another first step?

Now I'm told that applying for doctoral candidacy is the first step on my journey. Another first? It seems to defy logic! How many "first" steps can there be?

Anyway, I choose to take this next first step. Eyes open wide to both the difficulties and possibilities that making this decision provides, or so I think, and with an APA scholarship to ease the financial burden. So, I slip furtively, surreptitiously into doctoral study.

Now I wear the label of 'doctoral candidate' or 'researcher-in-training' and often I feel just as much an impostor as I did during my undergraduate years.



## In sympathy with *Harry Potter*

I apologise to J. K. Rowling for this presumption, but I'm sure I know a little of how *Harry Potter* must sometimes feel, because I too dwell in a 'cupboard under the stairs' (Rowling, 1997). I gave our Post-grad Lab this nickname for a couple of reasons. The first is literal. We access our study space via a locked doorway under two flights of stairs at the far back corner of our campus. The second reason is metaphorical. Just as Harry's space served to cut him off from interaction with his foster-family, the (al)location of this space serves to cut post-doctoral candidates off from the faculty; the people with whom interaction should logically be taking place if we are to be socialised into the community of scholars to which we might aspire to belong. And, as with Harry, little thought or recognition appears to be given to where we fit within our 'family.'

Our space is pleasant enough – internally, it's a modern, bright and cheery place, despite inefficient temperature regulation. And the company is grand: an intellectually stimulating, culturally diverse group of people, eclectic in terms of research topics, paradigmatic positioning, career stage and motivation.<sup>20</sup> But we are undeniably cut off, relegated to a place 'below' – our lack of altitude reinforcing our lack of status. We are remote from the faculty members alongside whom we could, and should perhaps, be working and learning. Possibly forgotten, and largely neglected by all but a few, our experience is that little thought or encouragement is given to our future, post-doctorate, by those in power.<sup>21</sup>

And I cannot help but wonder about how this compares with the experiences of other doctoral candidates in different faculties and universities. I wonder, too, whether there is a better, more inclusive and productive way of nurturing the 'research spirit,' and about the difference that might make to both the experiences and outcomes of doctoral study.



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<sup>20</sup> My fellow postgraduate students are either post-teaching career (retired) early researchers or (generally overseas-based or part-time) mid-teaching career early researchers.

<sup>21</sup> And here I gladly acknowledge the nurturing I have received from past and present supervisors, the collegiality of fellow post-grad students, and the fellowship I now feel as a member of the faculty Arts, Culture and Community Research Group within the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania.

## Troubling(:) my future as an ‘early career researcher’

The magnificence of identity is its binding together of past, present, *and an anticipated future*. (McAdams, 1988, p. 252, emphasis added)

My life has just happened; one thing has led to another and I have felt no need to plan. When people say to me, as they have done often, “Aren’t you sorry you didn’t go to uni years ago?” I have no cause to regret my earlier choices in this regard. I did what felt right, or that I felt I needed to do, at the time. And my life has benefited in numerous ways<sup>22</sup> from the alternate course that I have taken.

Perhaps, with hindsight, I had never, in my life pre-uni, given much consideration to my future because my life was full of compromise. To a certain extent, at least, I lacked an independent identity; I was so busy doing ‘the right thing,’ and trying to be everything to everyone else, that I gave no thought to being me. Sometimes I felt resentful, but I think I mostly accepted the roles of wife, mother and office worker as ‘my lot.’ In academic terms, I had subordinated my individualistic career goals, if I had any, to relational and family ties (Plunkett, 2001, p. 152).

My life experiences and my experiences in school, working as an aide, have helped me enormously with my uni studies and my research. My “sensible” choices as a student in high school were beneficial within the university context when it came to typing up assignments, and now a thesis. And my children’s learning difficulties and my own personal interest in reading drove my Honours research topic choice. I am who I am now because of the choices I have made and the valuable experiences I have had on my journey as I have meandered along life’s path. My path has been one that has provided me with a secure footing thus far, and which, I have been told, will provide a solid foundation for my future.

But lately, a sense of agency has usurped serendipity (Plunkett, 2001) and I feel a sense of urgency in my step. I find that I am looking more often to the future, and it troubles me that I see a question mark hanging over that time. Next year, hopefully, I will be accepted by my assessors into a fellowship of scholars, and I would very much like to be able to anticipate taking my (rightful?) place amongst my colleagues and become an ‘early career researcher.’<sup>23</sup> But, while I am currently at an earlier ‘career’ stage, that of doctoral candidate, or perhaps ‘trainee’ or ‘pre-early career researcher,’ my biography profiles me as an ‘early researcher’ from eleven years of age. Only the ‘career’ aspect has been and is currently absent. And what I fear is that it may always *be* absent. So while, to a certain extent, I (will) trouble the definition of the term ‘early career researcher,’ it troubles me, too. I am not comfortable with the prospect of not actually having a career.

When I made the choice to continue on to doctoral study, I knew that there was little hope of a post-doctoral career in educational research within our faculty. Following closely on their heels, I had observed the rejection faced by my colleagues, Dr Tim Moss and Dr Michael Kelly – exemplary as students, early researchers, and tutors. Good enough to do the work, but failing to meet one essential criterion needed in order to be awarded a position: they did not have two years’ teaching experience. I thought then that

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<sup>22</sup> Not the least of which is that I am mother to three bright, capable, uniquely talented and independent young women.

<sup>23</sup> “A researcher who has a PhD, or equivalent research qualification or experience, awarded on or after 1 March 2001” (Australian Research Council, 2006, section 5.2.1.1).

I could live with that prospect, but now I want more. *Damn it!* I want *more*. I want more than a nod and a handshake at graduation. More than a doctoral testamur. More than the chance to ‘dress up’ in a red-satin lined cape and matching bonnet. And more than the congratulations of family, friends and colleagues. I want the fulfilment of the ‘feminist myth.’ I want a relationship, family, a clean house and decent meal on the table at the end of each day, as well as a career!

What I want is to be recognised as a researcher, albeit as an ‘early career researcher.’  
What I want is a career in (educational or social science) research.

Similar to colleagues fighting for a share of research funding, I am increasingly becoming disenchanted by my lack of capacity to envisage “a stable and fruitful future” (Bazeley, 2003, p. 257) in academic research. And “in order to know who I am, I must have some inkling of what I am going to *do* in the future” (McAdams, 1988, p. 252).



## **Going with the (narrative) ‘flow’**

Generally speaking, however, my experience of ‘becoming’ is more uplifting than despairing. There are times when I find my research to be simultaneously demanding and rewarding. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes these optimal moments as ‘flow experiences.’ He has researched extensively in this and related fields and has demonstrated that these experiences are some of the most enjoyable and rewarding of a life time. During flow experiences, complete absorption with the task is accompanied by a feeling that time itself is suspended.

I believe that my early life experiences acted as flow moments to positively reinforce my growing ‘researcher identity.’ The conversations I engaged in with relatives over a shared ancestry (arranging and conducting interviews), searching the records held by the local genealogical society (document searches), searching tombstones in grave-yards (field work), adding names, dates and locations to my family tree (data management and record-keeping), planning which pairs of birds to mate (hypothesis generation and proposal planning), then watching expectantly as the feather shafts began to grow and colours were evident (observation) and recording the results (data recording) were all research-related activities. And I passionately engaged with them all.

Working on my current research project also allows me to experience these moments of flow. Those times when challenge level matches skill level (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) are most apparent to me: when I am reading, and totally engrossed in discovery and learning; in my engagement with others; through writing and creativity; through the reflexivity involved in the exploration of my own biography and its influence on my identity and research; and during times of generativity.

I’ve always loved reading, and researching gives me plenty of opportunity to read about and explore ideas, and the research of others. I enjoy the process of discovery that this involves and how this process has enabled me to build a foundation for understanding and to make connections between ideas. Learning is a vital activity for me now.

My research also satisfies my need to engage with people. Although much of what happens in social science research might be seen as an imposition, I find the best of my

engagement with it to be amazingly fulfilling. My current research allows me an insight into teachers' lives – both professional and personal – and I engage with them on both levels. Interview conversations connect me with these real people, their motivations, their ideologies, their deepest emotional concerns. Through my research I come to understand what people care deeply about. That's significant to me, but I believe it's also significant for my interviewees. I have precious memories of times and conversations shared, and I believe that they, too, accord similar worth to our interactions.

And my research also fulfils some of my book-lover's desire to be a writer. Before I began formal research studentship, I felt sure that I had no story to write, or not one that was worth writing, anyway. In my drawing, I was never 'creative,' tending to draw what I saw in front of me, and in my writing, I've never been creative in the sense of 'making up' plots. However, narrative research gives me an outlet for my previously untapped, and therefore still developing, writing skills, and gives me a source of inspiration: something 'real' to write about. At the same time, I am freed through this writing to make valid connections between the biographies and lives of those about whom I write and the context of their work, and my own experiences. Computers give me the freedom to 'fiddle' with what I write; a freedom I have never found in putting pen to paper.

However, narrative research also provides me with enormous challenges. My research not only has to meet quality criteria equivalent to other forms of research, but it also has to be judged by criteria as an art form; this writing, this creation, must also be 'a thing of beauty' (to me at least). And I cannot help but feel hurt when some colleagues, obviously through a lack of understanding of the processes involved, are less than supportive of narrative or arts-based research, believing that it is somehow 'less than' their own rigorous endeavours. Indeed, I would challenge them to explore just a little of their selves and to uncover some of what shapes their practices, for as Goodson says:

Listening to the teacher's voice should teach us that the autobiographical, 'the life,' is of substantial concern when teachers talk of their work. And at a commonsensical level, I find this essentially unsurprising. What I do find surprising, if not frankly unconscionable, is that for so long some researchers have ruled this part of the teacher's account out as irrelevant data.

Life experiences and background are obviously key ingredients of the person that we are, of our sense of self. To the degree that we invest our 'self' in our teaching, experience and background therefore shape our practice. (Goodson, 1997, p. 146)

And where Goodson has said "teachers" and "teaching" I would suggest that he could equally have said "researchers" and "researching."

In narrative research, at least, there is considerable self investment, and to be reflexive and reflective in research is both challenging and rewarding. I bring so much of my self and my participants' selves to my research. My own participation in the support group workshops has helped me explore my biography and ideology, especially the more 'masked' aspects of my self, and the influence of my biography on my being and becoming who I am today. Jersild (1954, 1955) suggests that to examine and to do work upon the self is essential for teachers and here again I believe that there is guidance for researchers in his message:



A teacher cannot make much headway in understanding others or in helping others to understand themselves unless he is endeavoring to understand himself. If he is not engaged in this endeavor, he will continue to see those whom he teaches through the bias and distortions of his own unrecognized needs, fears, desires, anxieties, hostile impulses, and so on. (Jersild, 1955, pp. 13-14)

The reciprocal nature of the sharing within the workshops has meant that my participants and I have shared some intensely personal moments of reflection and self discovery. I am aware that this process of deep and intimate sharing is not one that is typical of all research. At times, and as a consequence of my particular choice of topic, my research has been emotionally demanding of me. However, getting to know others at a deeper level than is usual, outside of intimate relationships, has been a privilege I have enjoyed.

Furthermore, within my academic endeavours, I am provided with opportunities to ‘pay forward’ the nurturance and collegiality that I have enjoyed. I desire and am encouraged to be generative:

Generativity ... is the issue of middle adulthood, arising after one has achieved an identity and established intimate relationships with others and is thus ready to take on the responsibilities of *caring for* the next generation. (McAdams, 1988, pp. 252-253)

I enjoy the times when I am able to show my ‘care’ for the next generation of teachers/-researchers. I believe that my past engagements with students within our faculty has been mutually beneficial; not only have I been able to give, but have found that giving has its own intrinsic rewards (Seligman, 1991). I’m pleased, too, that, on a number of occasions since he supervised my own beginning research study, Robin has invited me to share the supervision of several of his Honours students. I find these times shared with my colleague and our research students in discussions to be positive, productive and enlightening experiences. I was pleased, too, with an invitation extended by our Honours Coordinator for me to speak with current Honours students earlier this year. I found the engagement with these students to be a refreshing break from my other ‘work,’ and I was encouraged by their reception of my comments. Some of these students have since sought me out individually, and I have enjoyed the conversations with them that have continued throughout the year.

These flow experiences make research a truly rewarding and addictive activity for me.



## **“Am I *there* yet?”**

University study opened the door to a whole new world of possibilities in research, as in life; possibilities I had never thought to consider.

At times, though, I will admit to feeling a bit like the kid on the back seat of the car having set out on a long journey to an unfamiliar destination. I’m unsure about how long the journey will take and, at each stop along the way, I wonder about whether I’ve actually arrived. Sometimes it feels as if I might *never* quite reach ‘there’ – but worse, I don’t know where I’m going or why I’m bothering to take the trip! Then a conversation with a fellow traveller occurs and I’m more able to enjoy the journey for its own sake.

What I recognise now is that my genesis, my 'coming into being,' as a researcher began long before university, not with commencing doctoral study, or with the 'first step' as nominated by the Honours Coordinator. My interest in research is long-held, though it hasn't always been formal. Perhaps it began when I was 12 years old and breeding budgies in boxes in the backyard? Or the previous year, when I first found myself in the branches of my family tree? Maybe I've always possessed an inherently curious and enquiring mind.

Identities have histories.

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